



# NEWS RELEASE

## UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

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### 'A Long Time To Wait'

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**KIRTLAND AFB, N.M.** — Fifty-five years is a long time to wait. Just ask Irving J. Stolet.

Stolet is a volunteer worker in Kirtland's Base Retiree Activities and Volunteer Office. His coworkers have often recognized his efforts with that office. In December, however, he finally received praise for work he did more than a half-century ago.

In October of 1941, Stolet, an Army Air Corps aircraft welder, attended an unusual meeting. Several visitors to his base were looking for volunteers willing to leave service in the U.S. Army, and go to China to help establish an aerial fighting force. Stolet saw an opportunity.

"In 1941, the U.S. military was pretty quiet — doing its own thing. Pilots and maintenance people were pretty restless and ready to do something interesting," Stolet said. The pay wouldn't be bad, either — as much as \$350 a month, compared to the \$21 Stolet was earning as a PFC in the Army.

Stolet agreed to join. He would become a crew chief for one of the world's most famous flying outfits - the American Volunteer Group, better known as the Flying Tigers.

The Tigers were commanded by Claire Lee Chenault. Chenault was a retired Army Air Corps officer who had accepted an invitation to help the Chinese develop their air force. His American superiors had rejected his theories about fighter tactics. The offer from China gave him a chance to find out if he was right.

From 1937 to 1941, Chenault led the small Chinese air force against the Japanese invasion. Casualties and the inability to replace equipment soon wore down the Chinese. The situation was desperate. In early 1941, Chenault returned to the U.S. He persuaded the Roosevelt administration to allow American pilots and support personnel to volunteer for service in China. He also arranged for the delivery of 100 P-40 fighter planes.

The P-40 was not the newest fighter available, but Chenault believed he could teach his volunteers to use it effectively against even the best Japanese aircraft.

One hundred planes. Ninety pilots. Less than 200 ground personnel. To this small force fell the task of defending China against what had already been four years of devastation by the Japanese air force. By the

time Stolet and Chenault's volunteer force arrived in China, Japanese pilots roamed the skies at will. China was in danger of being cut off from the rest of the world. The small AVG moved to defend vital ports like Rangoon, Burma, through which vital supplies arrived.

In December of 1941, Japan showed just how capable its air power was. In addition to the well-known attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese planes hit targets all over the Pacific. The Flying Tigers, with only three months of intensive training under Chenault, were soon locked in near-constant combat. They were almost always outnumbered – sometimes as much as eight-to-one. It didn't matter. Chenault's tactics were sound, and the pilots were determined. Ground crewmembers like Stolet found creative ways to keep the small number of planes flying.

The Tigers constantly moved their three small squadrons, which gave them the appearance of a much larger force. This flexibility helped them defend the port of Rangoon for nearly three months, allowing thousands of tons of supplies to reach China. After the Japanese captured the port, Chenault used his force like a 'mobile fire department,' defending whatever areas seemed to be enemy priorities.

The AVG disbanded on July 4, 1942. U.S. officials had pressured Chenault to incorporate the group back into the Army Air Corps. During eight months of fighting, isolated from most outside help, the volunteers had achieved remarkable success. Officially, the group shot down 297 enemy planes, and destroyed another 240 on the ground. Unofficial estimates add hundreds more planes to that score. The Tigers lost only 11 planes in combat. This incredible effort had entirely disrupted the Japanese air strategy, allowing China to survive the darkest days of World War II. Winston Churchill, then the British Prime Minister, compared the Tigers' achievements to the victory won by the Royal Air Force in the Battle of Britain.

Some of the Tigers remained in China, with the new Army Air Corps unit Chenault now commanded. They helped orient newly arrived personnel who would continue their legacy. The new unit used many of the symbols and traditions of the AVG, but Chenault's original crew never considered the newcomers to be true Tigers.

Stolet, like many of the volunteers, left China after the AVG disbanded. After working six weeks with a civilian airline, he returned to service with the Army Air Corps. He was sent back to the Pacific, where he served through the rest of the war. Although he retired from the Air Force in 1964, the service never officially recognized the time he spent with Chenault.

Until now.

On December 8, Air Force Chief of Staff General Ronald R. Fogleman met with many of the remaining members of the AVG in Dallas, Texas. There, he presented Distinguished Flying Crosses and Bronze Stars in acknowledgment of the group's accomplishments. The Defense Department officially recognized the service of Chenault's volunteer force, finally making family members and survivors eligible for veterans' benefits.

Stolet, who received one of the Bronze Stars, is pleased. "Non-recognition had been a thorn in our sides for a long time," he said. The volunteers may not have worn the Army uniform, but "we were kids looking for adventure and a way to fight for our country."

**NOTE TO EDITORS:** *For more information about this release, please contact 1st Lt. Dave DuBois. The photo can be found at <http://www.kirtland.af.mil/pa/images/wkman.jpg>*